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THE RECEPTION AND DELIVERY OF THE ORACLE IN REVELATION 13:9–10

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Abstract

This study will examine how the oracle in Revelation 13:9−10 might have been regarded by the original audience as it was recited by the lector to each of the seven churches. The oral cultural context from which it originated decisively shaped the oracle's form and content. That oral cultural context will be considered in this analysis. The investigation will be conducted in three steps. First, this essay will argue that in the recitation of Revelation, the assemblies in Asia Minor would have perceived the following: the author's presence, his authority as a prophet, and the divine presence. Second, it will demonstrate that in hearing the oracle in Revelation 13:9–10, the congregants would have heard John's voice and accepted the prophet's words as caring and authoritative. Finally, the poetic nature of the oracle will be examined for its ability to foster a sense of the semantic divine presence. Consequently, when the prophecy was read aloud, it may have nurtured feelings of awe, reverence, and respect for God in the listeners.

Keywords: New Testament prophecy; Orality; Poetry; Revelation, book of

1. Introduction

Most studies on the phenomenon of early Christian prophecy, as described in the New Testament, address either one or a combination of the following (e.g. Ellis 1978; Hill 1979; Gillespie 1985; Callan 1985; Tibbs 2007; Aune 1983; Boring 1991): 1) They attempt to determine what the prophets were doing by assigning a definition to their activity; 2) they endeavour to describe the function of the prophets; or 3) they investigate the nature of the oracles. However, these studies have not closely examined how specific oracles, embedded in the New Testament books, would have been delivered once they arrived at their intended destinations, or how they would have been understood by the communities that heard them recited.[1] The oral cultural context from which they originated decisively shaped their form and contents and must, therefore, be considered in any analysis.

I am grateful for the comments and suggestions received from the anonymous reviewers for *Scriptura*.

[1] David Barr (1986) has done some work on orality in Revelation. This present study will provide more robust support for how the Apocalypse would have been performed by the public reader and received by the original audience.

This study will address this gap by examining how the oracle recounted in Revelation 13:9–10[2] might have been regarded by the original audience.[3] In part, this study is concerned with determining the ancient understanding of the authoritative force of John's prophetic words. This investigation will be conducted in three steps. First, following a summary of the socio-historical situation of the churches in Asia Minor, this essay will argue that in the recitation of Revelation, the assemblies would have perceived the following: the author's presence, his authority as a prophet, and the divine presence. Second, it will demonstrate that in hearing the oracle in Revelation 13:9–10, the congregants would have heard the prophetic voice of John and accepted his words as caring and authoritative. Finally, the poetic nature of the oracle will be examined for its ability to foster a sense of the semantic divine presence. Consequently, when the prophecy was read aloud, it may have nurtured feelings of awe, reverence, and respect for God in the listeners.

2. The socio-historical situation of Revelation

What follows is a brief summary of the socio-historical situation of the author and the members of the seven churches receiving Revelation. The discussion will provide important background for understanding the significance of the prophetic oracle for John's listeners.

Recent scholarship claims that a crisis setting for Revelation is appropriate given that apocalypses emerge out of a critical situation (Boxall 2006:12; Collins 1984:137; Osborne 2002:11; Mounce 1997:3). Evidence in the book and from external sources suggests that the seven churches in Asia Minor faced major economic, political, and social issues. It is likely that there was pressure in the commercial arena for Christians to submit to pagan worship practices. For example, every craftsman and trader had the opportunity to belong to the relevant guild. These guilds included practices like sacrificing to a pagan god (and likely to the emperor as well) and participation in a common meal dedicated to a pagan deity (Kraybill 1996:196). In order to survive in the international marketplace, it was essential to join trade guilds. It would have been a compromise of a Christian's faith to participate in the activities of these organisations. The Nicolaitans (Rev 2:6, 15) seem to have been a group that corrupted the church by suggesting compromise with the culture of the day. Rather than worshiping God alone, they said it was appropriate to engage in cultural activities of the empire. The Nicolaitan practices were linked with Balaam (Rev 2:14–15) and Jezebel (Rev 2:20–23). One of the sins found in both the Balaam narrative and the Jezebel narrative (1 Kgs 16:31) is idolatry. Therefore, it is probable that the Nicolaitans encouraged the church in Ephesus to accommodate the pagans by participating in their practices (Osborne 2002:120–121). To counter the Nicolaitan's instructions, Revelation discloses the rewards for those who remain faithful despite the pressure to compromise (e.g. 6:9–11; 7:9–17).

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[2] This passage reads as follows: "Let anyone who has an ear listen: If you are to be taken captive, into captivity you go; if you kill with the sword, with the sword you must be killed. Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints." All biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

[3] Other oracles in the New Testament could be similarly investigated. However, Revelation lends itself to this type of examination because the book is not only apocalyptic in nature, but it is also prophetic. It is prophetic both by forthtelling (e.g. Rev 1:8) and foretelling (cf. Rev 1:19).

Christians in Asia Minor also experienced harassment from their Jewish neighbors. Informing the local authorities of Christian nonparticipation in emperor worship may have been one form of harassment enacted by some Jews. Another could have been pointing out to the Roman establishment that despite the apparent similarities between the two groups, the Christians were not, in fact, Jews, and therefore, were not exempt from emperor worship, as were the Jews.[4] In the early years of the church, Rome did not see a distinction between Christianity and Judaism. But later Jews antithetical to Christianity could act as informants for Rome against Christians. This scenario might explain the references to "the synagogue of Satan" in Rev 2:9 and 3:9 (DeSilva 1992:279).

In addition to external pressures to compromise, the letters to the seven churches reveal that the communities faced internal strife. These problems emerged in the form of false prophets whose teaching threatened to weaken community boundaries (Balaam, Rev 2:14, the Nicolaitans, Rev 2:6, 15, and Jezebel, Rev 2:20). As noted, it is likely the Nicolaitans (Rev 2:6) falsely "redefined apostolic teaching" so Christians could feel comfortable participating in the practices of pagan organisations (Beale 1999:30).

John's community was experiencing various forms of stress such as ostracism and social contempt. They likely faced some local persecution, but not widespread state persecution. The Christian community felt threatened and insecure and would have been subject to religious as well as social stress. This stress was produced by the externally enforced worship of the Roman emperor, with social and economic sanctions applied against nonconformists.

3. Reception: Authorial presence

John, who was confined[5] to Patmos (Rev 1:9), wrote and sent correspondence to the seven churches in Asia Minor,[6] where a lector stood before each community and recited the letter (Rev 1:3; 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14).[7] The letter acted as a substitute for face-to-face communication (cf. Cicero, *Att*. 8.14.1; 12.53; Seneca, *Ep.* 75.1), which would presumably have taken place if John was physically present at the congregations. Written correspondence, as with other literature in the 1st century, was often read out loud by the recipient or by another literate individual on behalf of the recipient. While low literacy

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4 In contrast to the pressures facing Christians, Judaism, under Roman rule, enjoyed the privilege of the right to practice religion unhindered (Kraybill 1996:172–173). Josephus cites a long list of privileges extended to Diaspora Jews (*Ant.* 16.6.2). Ephesus, Pergamum, Sardis, and Laodicea all had Jewish communities. It is possible there was little or no persecution during Domitian's reign, assuming a late date for Revelation's composition (Collins 1984:70).

5 The phrase διὰ τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ τὴν μαρτυρίαν Ἰησοῦ (Rev 1:9) may indicate that John was on Patmos for missionary purposes or it could mean that he was sent there as an exile. It is likely that his presence on the island was not for the purpose of proclaiming the word of God, but rather that he had been exiled there by the state as punishment for preaching. The phrase "because of" (διὰ) is always used in Revelation for the result of an action and not to designate a purpose for an action (Boring 1989:82).

6 The number seven may be symbolic. If so, the seven historical churches are viewed as representative of all the churches in Asia Minor and probably, by extension, the church universal. See Gregory Beale (1999:186–187) for further discussion.

7 No conclusive consensus has been reached on the identity of the angels of the churches to which each of the seven letters in Rev 2–3 are addressed (2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14). See Everett Ferguson (2011) for a list of proposals. Ferguson contends that the designation ἄγγελος refers to the human congregational reader of each church.

rates contributed to the popularity of oral recitation, even highly literate persons were accustomed to listening to passages read out loud, especially when the availability of texts was limited (e.g. Pliny, *Ep.* 9.34). Seneca articulated the benefit of listening to something recited, even if a person was fully literate, when he asked and answered, '"But why,' one asks, 'should I have to continue hearing lectures on what I can read?' 'The living voice,' one replies, 'is a great help.'" (*Ep.* 33.9).[8] The 1st century Mediterranean world was a blend of an oral and a scribal culture. It was a world familiar with writing, but still significantly, even predominately, oral.

1st century oral cultures believed that the reading of a letter created a sense of the author's tangible presence (e.g. Seneca, *Ep.* 40.1). The letter was considered by some ancient rhetorical theorists as one half of a conversation or a replacement for dialogue (e.g. Demetrius, *Eloc*. 223; Cicero, *Fam.* 12.30.1). Seneca conveyed this notion when he wrote: "Whenever your letters arrive, I imagine that I am with you, and I have the feeling that I am about to speak my answer, instead of writing it" (Seneca, *Ep.* 67.2).[9] The words were a mirror of their spoken counterpart, letting the absent author come to life (Fögen 2018:61). The author was regarded as concretely present in the reading or hearing of his letter, almost seen and heard through his written words. This notion is expressed in another one of Seneca's letters: "I see you, my dear Lucilius, and at this very moment I hear you; I am with you to such an extent that I hesitate whether I should not begin to write you notes instead of letters. Farewell." (Seneca, *Ep.* 55.11:371, 373)[10]

Like these secular letters, there is a significant amount of oral/aural language in New Testament epistles, suggesting an ongoing conversation between the author and the recipients of the letters.[11] For example, James exhorts his audience to "listen, my beloved brothers and sisters" (Jas 2:5). The author of Hebrews uses language that stresses the actions of speaking, which are appropriate to persons engaged in a conversation (e.g. Heb 5:11; 6:9; 9:5). Both Jesus and John repeatedly urge the audience to "listen" to or "hear" what the Spirit is saying to the churches (e.g. Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22; 13:9).

John's epistle to the congregations in Asia Minor served as a substitute for his personal presence.[12] The individuals reciting the epistle effectively eliminated the distance in time and space between the author and the reader/audience, giving John's words real immediacy. In the oral/aural experience of the hearers, the voice that was heard within the assembly was not only a text but was at the same time the voice of the lector and the voice of John. John was not present in any mystical way but was in attendance by means of his voice.

4. Reception: A prophetic presence

In several New Testament documents it is apparent that the authors believed they had received an authoritative divine message and were communicating these prophetic words in writing to various church assemblies. For example, Paul tells the Thessalonian community "with a word of the Lord" (ἐν λόγῳ κυρίου) what will happen to the

8 As noted by Rex Winsbury (2009:112).

9 See also Seneca, *Ep.* 40.1; Cicero, *Att.* 9.10.1; *Quint. fratr.* 1.1.45; Pliny, *Ep.* 6.

10 See also *Select Papyri* (1932:112).

11 "Aural" means of or relating to the ear or to the sense of hearing.

12 This was true of other New Testament epistles as well (cf. 1 Cor 5:1–5).

Christians who had died before the hoped-for return of Jesus (1 Thess 4:15). Also, in Paul's statement in 2 Corinthians 13:2− 3: "Since you desire proof that Christ is speaking… ", λαλοῦντος (speaking) is a present tense participle, communicating that Christ is speaking through Paul even as he now speaks to them through the reading of the letter. The author of Hebrews also believed his discourse was an extension or form of God's own speech. He indicates that he expects his sermon to function with the power and authority of God's own word: "See to it that you do not refuse the one who is speaking; for if they did not escape when they refused the one who warned them on earth, how much less will we escape if we reject the one who warns from heaven!" (Heb 12:25).[13] The audience is hearing God's voice in the moment of the delivery of the sermon. Finally, John was a Spirit-endowed prophet, called to communicate the words of God to the seven churches in Asia Minor (Rev 1:1−2; 1:7; 22:6). This language conveys that not only were the recipients receiving correspondence from John or Paul, but from God or Christ, who had conveyed the communication to a divine envoy.[14]

The individuals who received messages from God or Christ and were commissioned to deliver the oracles were to be viewed and treated by the members of the church as divinely authorised agents. Agents or messengers would have possessed some of the comprehensive authority delegated to them by their commissioners (Derrett 2005:55). In the Greek world, heralds were sacred and under the divine protection of Hermes, the divine herald (Hesiod, *Theog.* 939; Homer, *Od.* 12.390). The sacred and protected nature of heralds was also respected amongst the Romans, who recognised the essential nature of the protection (*The Digest of Justinian* 50.7.18; Watson 2009:436). One of the great maxims of the Jewish law of agency was that a man's agent was like himself (*b. Ḥag*. 1:8, IV.1.C; Derrett 2005:52). The person commissioned was always the representative of the man (or God) who authorised the commission.[15] Jesus likely had this law of agency in mind when he spoke to his disciples: "Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me" (Luke 10:16).[16] Thus, when the language in Revelation indicates that the author is conveying a divine message, not only is the lector giving voice to John, but he is also invoking the presence of the divinely commissioned prophetic messenger.

5. Reception: Divine presence

While the congregations heard the voice of the prophet John through the lector, they actually heard far more, as the prophet became a surrogate for God or Christ as he delivered a divine oracle (e.g. Rev 1:7–8; 13:9–10).[17] So, as the lector personified the prophet, he also represented the presence of God or Jesus in the community.[18] Ancient

[13] The identity of the "one who is speaking" is somewhat ambiguous and is disputed. However, Jonathan Griffiths (2014:147) contends that in its immediate context, God must have been the ultimate speaker.

[14] Of course, the Spirit is also ministering through all these voices, making the message efficacious to the congregations (Matt 10:20; John 16:13; 1 Thess 1:5; Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22).

[15] Contra Thomas Martin (2018:249) who says that "ventriloquism does not carry quite the same authority as God's direct voice".

[16] See also Matthew 10:40 and John 13:20.

[17] Despite John's claim to possess prophetic status (Rev 1:1–3), there was no guarantee that his message would be accepted by everyone as coming from God. He could have been rejected as other prophets who claimed divine authorisation (cf. Hos 9:7; Mark 6:1–4; Luke 13:31-35; 2 Cor 13:2−3).

[18] William Doan and Terry Giles (2005:29) make a similar claim regarding the Old Testament scribe.

written documents from various levels of leadership carried a sense of the presence of the ruler in epistolary form (Doty 2014:6).

Timothy Ward's (2009) work helps to explain how the divine presence might have been conceived by a 1st century audience upon hearing the prophetic announcement. Ward (2009:60–67) argues that God is semantically present when a person hears (or reads) God's words. He claims that Scripture indicates an "astoundingly close relationship between God as himself and the words (spoken or written) through which he speaks" (2009:26). To support this assertion, Ward (2009:26–32) cites, amongst other examples, Adam and Eve's disobedience to God's spoken command and the ensuing punishment. Their disregard of his spoken order to not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil result in a fractured relationship with God himself, as they are sent out of his presence in the Garden (Gen 2:17; 3:24; Ward 2009:26–27). In another example, the Lord's anger is aroused when Uzzah irreverently touches the ark that houses the words of God inscribed on the tablets (2 Sam 6:7). According to Ward (2009:29–30), Uzzah is struck dead instantly because God is represented in the ten words or commandments inscribed on the tablets in the ark to such an extent that he is, in some sense, present in those words. For Ward (2009:66), God has so identified himself with his words that whatever someone does to God's words (whether it is to obey, to disobey, or to treat with disrespect, etc.) they do directly to God himself. God has chosen to use words as a fundamental means of revealing himself to humanity – though not exhaustively. God reveals himself by being semantically present to readers or listeners, as he promises, warns, rebukes, reassures and so on in Scripture.

When God or Jesus (or any person) promises, warns, rebukes, or reassures (or speaks any other performative verb) they are executing what speech-act theorists call an illocutionary act.[19] John Austin's book (1975) on speech-act theory provides ways for linguists to think about words as actions, or performatives. To denote the effect or intention of an illocutionary act, Austin uses the word "perlocutions". The term perlocutions refers to how "saying something can bring about certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience, or of the speaker, or of other persons" (Austin 1975:101). An illocutionary act is achieved *in* saying something, while a perlocutionary act is achieved *by* saying something. For example, a person performs an illocutionary act by saying "the toaster is hot". He or she is verbalising a warning. The goal, however, of giving this warning, is to persuade anyone in the vicinity of the toaster to act with caution and thus avoid getting burned. The goal of the statement is labelled a perlocutionary act. In this sense, words can be viewed "like servants dispatched to do the bidding of their master" (Caird 2002:21).

People (and God) speak to bring about various outcomes or effects, or to accomplish specific purposes. Speech-act theory reaffirms the interpersonal nature of textual communication. God, rather than a text, is promising, warning, rebuking, and reassuring humanity. Perlocutions may also operate through delegation (Caird 2002:25). When a person encounters the words of an Old or New Testament prophet, he or she is in direct contact with God's words – his semantic presence.[20] Thus, the public reader stood in the

[19] Daniel Vanderveken (1990:166–219) lists over 270 English performative verbs.

[20] For pagan ways of staging the divine presence see Angelos Chaniotis (2013:169–189). It is important to note that Ward (2009:65) is not claiming that God is present when the Bible is open and being read and he is not present when the book is closed. Neither is he saying that individual words or phrases from the Bible, when

place of the prophet John and made both him and God present. The prophet was more than God's representative for, in "the moment of delivery of the prophecy he was an active extension of God's personality and as such, was God in person" (Myers and Freed 1966:50). Subsequently, we will examine how a specific prophetic word from John to the churches may have been expressed.

6. Delivery: A compassionate and authoritative word from John (Rev 13:9–10)

Following the vision of the beast who wages war against the church, and who likely was the representative of the Roman Empire, is a prophetic proclamation formula or a call for attention: "If anyone has an ear, let him hear" (Rev 13:9; Aune 1983:282). Here, without warning, anyone listening to the lector is abruptly addressed in the text. The formula is similar to those that open many Old Testament prophetic speeches (e.g. Isa 7:13, 28:14; Jer 2:4). In the *Iliad*, Zeus makes use of the call for attention formula: κέκλυτέ μευ, πάντες τε θεοὶ πᾶσαί τε θέαιναι ("Hear me, all you gods and goddesses"; Homer 1925: 340–341). The call for attention formula suggests that the poetic saying that follows, is of oracular nature (Aune 1983:282).

> If anyone has an ear, let him hear.
> If anyone [is destined] for captivity, into captivity he goes.
> If anyone kills with the sword, by the sword he must be killed.
> Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints. (Rev 13:9-10)[21]

The oracle is arranged in two parallel lines. It appears to be formulated in close association with Jeremiah 15:2 LXX and 43:11 LXX (Rev 13:10a). A concluding formula articulates a call for Christians to endure persecution, and is likely the seer's own words rather than part of the divine message (Rev 13:10b; Aune 1983:282).

The difficulties in this text have produced multiple textual variants, providing evidence that scribes found the original passage quite problematic.[22] At issue is the identity of who is taken captive and killed, and by whom these deeds are done. Craig Koester (2014:587–588) believes the saying has a double meaning.[23] First, the warning pertains to the faithful, who may lose their freedom and lives if they refuse to worship the beast. Second, the statement expresses the principle of retributive justice (*jus talonis*). As such, persecuted Christians should exercise patience because God will punish the guilty for their crimes. The concept of retributive justice and divine vengeance may have brought present comfort, hope, and encouragement to Christians who were victims of evil. Other scholars do not consider the oracle as a promise of divine punishment of the wicked but, instead, believe the warning affirms the suffering of God's people and exhorts their perseverance through it (Beale 1999:704).

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read privately or out loud, are somehow filled with divine presence, as if they are religious relics believed to possess magical powers.

21 My translation.

22 See David Aune (1998:750–751) for a discussion of textual variances and interpretive options.

23 George Wesley Buchanan (2005:358) also understands both lines to be promises of divine justice on behalf of the persecuted saints.

It is not the point of this essay to determine the intent of the oracle. Regardless of its meaning, for the purposes of this essay it is significant that the message to the oppressed churches originated with John, a fellow victim of persecution who cared for the Christians' plight. While it was not possible for John to be with the congregations in person, his presence was felt through the reading of his letter. In the ancient world sending a letter was not a trivial matter, but a clear statement expressing the author's concern and compassion for the recipients (cf. Seneca, *Ep. Ad Lucilius* 59.1). According to Pseudo-Demetrius (*Eloc*. 224), a letter is "written and sent as a kind of gift". In his absence, John thought of sending a gift to those he loved – an oracle (Rev 13:9–10), providing insight into how the church should respond to its oppression.

John was not merely a compassionate brother providing good advice for Christians experiencing persecution, but also a Spirit-endowed prophet, called to communicate the counsel of Jesus and God to the seven churches in Asia Minor (Rev 1:1−3; 1:7; 22:6). The recipients were receiving guidance from a divine envoy in the form of a prophetic word concerning the proper view of suffering that Christians should hold,[24] bolstering John's exhortation that they remain faithful to their confession regardless of the pressures to do otherwise. Next, we will consider the poetic nature of the prophetic word, which would have resulted in the lector delivering it in a manner distinct from the other voices in the text competing for the listeners' attention.[25]

7. Delivery: The poetic nature of the divine word (Rev 13:9–10)

In addition to the compassionate and authoritative nature of the words from John, it is also important to note that the poetic form of the oracle cultivates a sense of the divine presence. Oracles in both Testaments are often poetic with formal regularities which set them apart from prose literature.[26] Citing the speech of Moses (Deut 32), Josephus noted that the poetic form is characteristic of Hebrew prophecy (*Ant.* 4.303).[27] James Kugel (1990:5) observes certain connections between the act of prophesying in the Old Testament and the accoutrements of music making or poetry (1 Sam 10:5; 2 Kings 3:14–16). John's prophetic word in Revelation 13:9–10 has several poetic features, distinguishing it from what is written before and after the instruction.

> Εἴ τις ἔχει οὖς ἀκουσάτω.
> εἴ τις εἰς αἰχμαλωσίαν, εἰς αἰχμαλωσίαν ὑπάγει·
> εἴ τις ἐν μαχαίρῃ ἀποκτανθῆναι αὐτὸν ἐν μαχαίρῃ ἀποκτανθῆναι.
> Ὧδέ ἐστιν ἡ ὑπομονὴ καὶ ἡ πίστις τῶν ἁγίων.

An initial poetic characteristic in the oracle is that the text is an example of anaphora (Demetrius, *Eloc.* 268; Quintilian, *Inst.* 9.3.30) in that successive phrases begin with the same words (εἴ τις). An additional poetic device is present in the first line of the oracle,

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[24] Of course, the Spirit is also ministering through all these voices, making the message efficacious to the congregations (Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22; 13:9).

[25] See M. Eugene Boring (1992:334−359) who analyses the various speaking voices in Revelation.

[26] For example, in the New Testament see Revelation 3:5b, 10; 13:10; 16:6; 22:12, 18–19 (Boring 1991:156). See also Luke 1:14–17, 32–33, 35, 46b–55, 68–79; 2:29–32, 34–35; 1 Corinthians 3:17; 14:38; 15:51–52; 16:22; 2 Corinthians 9:6; Romans 2:12; 11:25–26; Galatians 1:9.

[27] As noted by Boring (1991:156).

which is written in the form of anadiplosis (Quintilian, *Inst.* 9.3.44–45). Anadiplosis exists when there is a repetition of a word or words which end a clause at the beginning of the next clause (εἴ τις εἰς αἰχμαλωσίαν, εἰς αἰχμαλωσίαν ὑπάγει). Anaphora and anadiplosis both contribute to the rhythm and rhyme in the oracle. Rhythm transpires with the periodic re-emergence of the same significant element or factor. Pseudo-Longinus, in discussing the sublime or that which produces exalted language and has the effect of being dignified and filled with grandeur, points to the aural effects of rhythm ([*Subl.*] 39–42). Furthermore, rhythm could have provided auditory stability to the original hearers' already chaotic world, thereby minimising their anxiety (Myers and Freed 1966:43).

The oracle's rhythmic poetic style may have been one of the characteristics that conveyed its authority. In the Hellenistic and Roman periods, the poetic form of oracles was viewed as an indication of their divine origin, because the Greeks widely accepted the divine inspiration of poetry. Socrates stated that poets "don't do what they do from wisdom, but from some natural inspiration, like prophets and oracle mongers" (Plato, *Apol.* 22b8–c2; 1925:125). Socrates noted about poets that: "For the god, as it seems to me, intended him to be a sign to us that we should not waver or doubt that these fine poems are not human or the work of men, but divine and the work of gods; and that the poets are merely the interpreters of the gods, according as each is possessed by one of the heavenly powers" (Plato, *Ion.* 534e–535a; 1925:425).[28] Some of the Psalms, which are poetic by nature, contain oracles where God is addressing Israel, or the nations, or pagan deities (e.g. Ps 81:6–16, 82:2–7; Kugel 1990:6). As Robert Alter (2011:147) says, poetry is our best human model of complex and rich communication, being "solemn, weighty, and forceful". Consequently, it is appropriate that divine speech should be represented as poetry. Katie Heffelfinger (2013:38) states it another way: by setting prophetic texts in poetry, ancient Israelite prophets were "putting divine speech in special divine speech quotation marks".

Given that the style of language of the oracle is different from that which precedes or follows it, the poetic form tends to indicate a change in speaker – God is now addressing the church. The transformation in language contributes to the sense of the divine presence within the community. Oracles set in poetry help the prophet project the persona of God himself to the audience. While John is speaking as a prophet, the oracle is verbalised as the present utterance of God (or Jesus) in person – he is personally speaking and addressing the listeners (Boring 1992:336). This divine persona also increases the chances that the audience will experience a type of divine encounter as they hear the oracle recited (Heffelfinger 2013:45).[29]

In political, judicial, or religious settings, ancient recitations were not flat or mumbled (Meyer 2004:87). They were a marked mode of expression to be used on deeply serious occasions. Poetry, with its aesthetic component, was a marked mode of communication that could call attention to itself through expressions of rhythm, rhyme, and other poetic devices (Barr 1988:50–51). As the oracle in Revelation 13:9–10 was brought to life by the lector, the audience would have recognised its unique language, which perhaps would

[28] See also Homer, *Od.* 8.488.

[29] See David Seal (2017) for a similar argument regarding the hymns and prayers in 4 Ezra and Revelation.

have alerted them to the importance of the communication, its divine origin, and the need for it to be considered dependable and binding.

Reverence and awe were likely stimulated by hearing the word from God. Jonathan Haidt (2012:28) contends that awe is usually triggered when two situations are present: first, vastness (something larger than us overwhelms us and makes us feel small), and second, our experience is not easily assimilated into existing mental structures. When people are mystified, they feel small, powerless, and passive.

Awe associated with the experience of being in the presence of an entity greater than the self, such as God, endows the being with higher status, respect and authority. A potential response of a subordinate who has perceived the characteristics of the person or deity who produced the awe, could involve heightened attention to the powerful person (Keltner and Haidt 2003:306). Endowing status to God, inspiring awe as a result of the divine voice, may have been encouraging for persecuted Christians and/or influential in motivating a faithful Christian commitment from the members of the churches in Asia Minor.

8. Summary and conclusion

This essay has demonstrated that, for the seven churches in Asia Minor, the prophetic word in Revelation 13:9−10 would have been received simultaneously as the voice of the divinely commissioned prophet John, the divine himself, and the lector. John's letters are "voiced texts" – written with the intent of an oral proclamation. Both the human and divine speakers were made present across great distances by having the written words proclaimed by a public reader. The congregants would have heard John's voice and accepted the prophet's words as caring and authoritative. In addition, the poetic nature of the oracle, when communicated, may have fostered a sense of the semantic divine presence. Prophetic poetry mediates the divine voice as direct speech. God was not absent, but *present* as his voice was heard in the reading of his commanding word. Consequently, when the prophecy was read aloud, it may have nurtured feelings of awe, reverence, and respect for God in the listeners. Furthermore, the poetic style of the oracle (Rev 13:9−10) gives it a unique style when delivered, bolstering its authoritative nature.

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